

The Reawaking of Karl Barth
(The Shack)

There are two things that amaze me in the evangelical world:

First, it absolutely amazes me at what evangelicals will do to get away from Scripture; and second, I am stunned at how little we know of scriptural theology – we have no discernment. And both of these shows up in Young’s book “The Shack.” This book has taken the evangelical world by storm, and it seems that most theologians are saying nothing about it. I read only a few pages to understand that something was critical wrong with this book. Yet, many have thought that I have overstepped my boundary in my assessment of the book by only reading the introduction and a few pages. Discernment is a real problem in our churches, and there can only be two reasons for this problem: First, we are not being taught the scriptures, or, second, we are not listening.

I agree with the President’s position from Southern Baptist University:

“The most controversial aspects of *The Shack*’s message have revolved around questions of universalism, universal redemption, and ultimate reconciliation. Jesus tells Mack: “Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don’t vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions.” Jesus adds, “I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, my Beloved.”

Mack then asks the obvious question — do all roads lead to Christ? Jesus responds, “Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you.” Given the context, it is impossible not to draw essentially universalistic or inclusivistic conclusions about Young’s meaning. “Papa” chides Mack that he is now reconciled to the whole world. Mack retorts, “The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?” “Papa” responds, “The whole world, Mack.”

Put together, all this implies something very close to the doctrine of reconciliation proposed by Karl Barth. And, even as Young’s collaborator Wayne Jacobson has lamented the “self-appointed doctrine police” who have charged the book with teaching ultimate reconciliation, he acknowledges that the first editions of the manuscript were unduly influenced by Young’s “partiality at the time” to ultimate reconciliation — the belief that the cross and resurrection of Christ accomplished then and there a unilateral reconciliation of all sinners (and even all creation) to God.”

Now in evaluating the book, it must be kept in mind that *The Shack* is a work of fiction. But it is also a sustained theological argument, and this simply cannot be denied.

Any number of notable novels and works of literature have contained aberrant theology, and even heresy. The crucial question is whether the aberrant doctrines are features of the story or the message of the work. When it comes to *The Shack*, the really troubling fact is that so many readers are drawn to the theological message of the book, and fail to see how it conflicts with the Bible at so many crucial points.

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